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Higher education in Flanders (Belgium)

Belgian (Flemish) Case Study - Caso da Bélgica (Flandres)

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Introduction

In many ways the last decade has been important for higher education in Flanders. The interplay between government, higher education institutions and the economy changed. As a result, discussions were held and decisions taken about the structure of higher education, its quality, its position in the international context, and so on.

These changes were studied as part of the research project "Governmental policies and programmes for strengthening the relationship between higher education and the national economy (HEINE)", a EU-funded TSER programme (SOE-CT97-2018). The Centre for Sociology of Education (Department of Sociology) of the University of Leuven carried out a study concerning the governmental higher-education policies and programmes in Flanders over a period of 30 years. In a second phase this was complemented with four case studies of higher education institutions (two universities and two colleges of higher education). In this way a detailed view on different aspects of the higher education - government - economy relationship was established (see, for example, van Heffen, O., J. Verhoeven, K. De Wit, 1999).

On the basis of the information gathered in the HEINE study, we will discuss some of the major issues at stake in higher education in Flanders. After a brief introduction on the state structure and the education system in general (Section 1), we first describe the difference and resemblance between university education and college education (Section 2). Then we turn to the distinction between state and private higher education and the diminishing impact of this distinction (Section 3). In Section 4 the system of free access to higher education in Flanders is discussed. Section 5 is about the quality assurance system that has become an important element both in the government's policies and for the higher education institutions themselves. Finally, we point out the main problems that beset the Flemish higher education system and take a brief look at possible developments in the near future (Section 6).

1. Flanders (Belgium): A brief introduction

1.1. The State Structure

Flanders is the northern, Dutch-speaking part of Belgium. Belgium is a federal state, composed of three policy levels each with their own legislative and executive bodies: the federal state, the Communities and the Regions. There is no hierarchy between these three policy levels; they each have their own responsibilities.

The three Regions (the Flemish Region, the Walloon Region and the Capital Region of Brussels) are responsible for matters partly or fully linked up with a well-determined territory. The three Communities (the Flemish Community, the French Community and the German-speaking Community) are responsible for the cultural and personal affairs within a certain linguistic area (the Flemish Community is fully responsible for the Dutch-speaking area and partly for the area of Brussels). Since 1989, this includes the full responsibility for education (with the exception of deciding on the pensions of the staff members of educational institutions, laying down compulsory school attendance and determining the minimum requirements to obtain a diploma, which remain responsibilities of the federal government).

The parliament and government of the Flemish Region and those of the Flemish Community were joined up to form one single Flemish Parliament and Flemish Government.

1.2. The Education System

Each Community in Belgium has its own education system respectively dealing with 55.84% (the Dutch-language system), 43.62% (the French-language system) and 0.54% (the German-

language system) of the overall number of pupils in Belgium (figures for the 1994-1995 school year; Ministry of the Flemish Community, Department of Education).

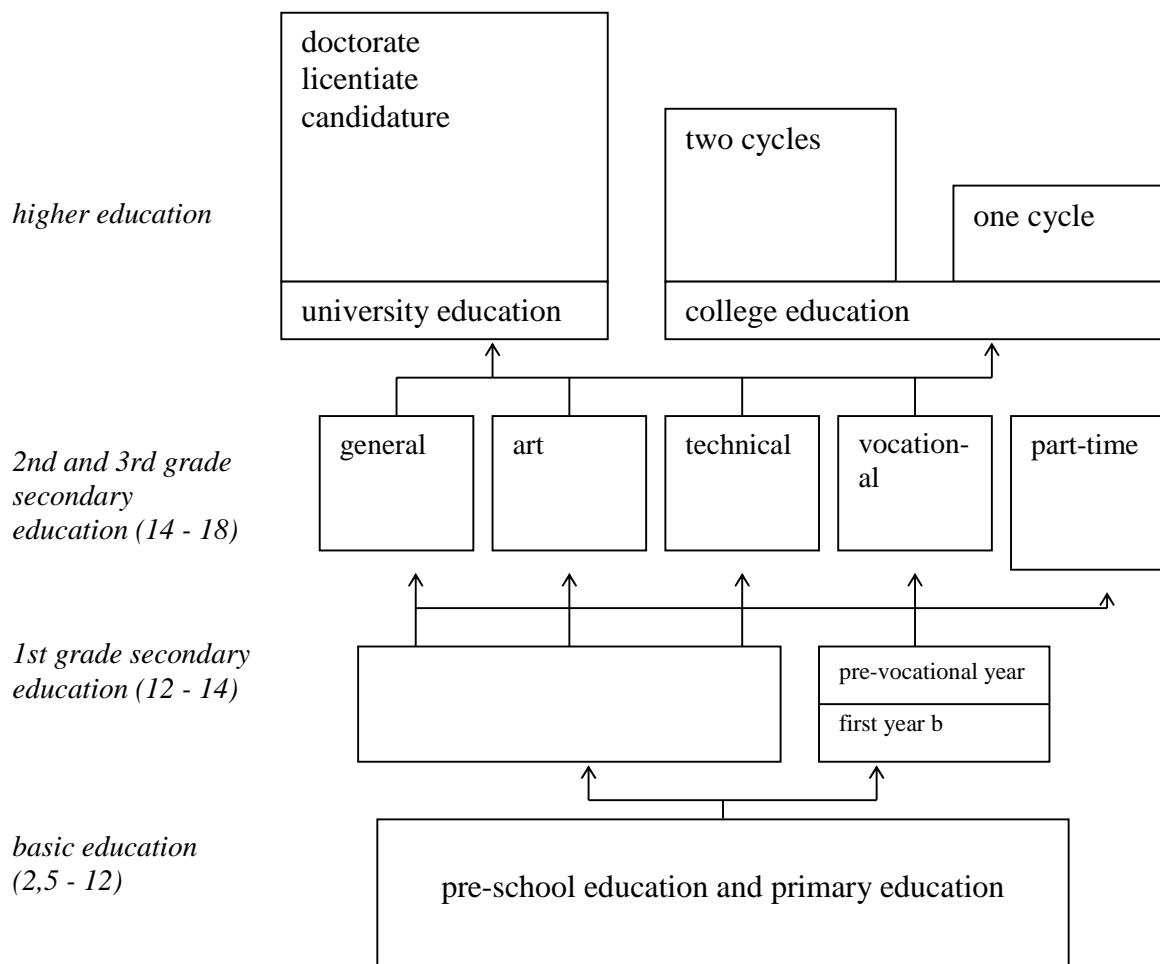
The Belgian Constitution guarantees freedom of education, that is the right to establish schools not connected in any way to the official authorities. This renders the organisation of educational networks possible (see Section 3). The State is authorised to establish schools to guarantee the freedom of choice of the parents; but it also has to subsidise schools of other organising bodies when they meet the legal and statutory requirements.

The 1983 compulsory school attendance Act obliges parents to have their children attend school for 12 years, starting from the year of their 6th birthday. The principle of free access to education guarantees that no entrance requirements are imposed, and that until the end of compulsory education (at the age of 18), the provision of education is free of charge for the pupils and their parents. Also at higher education level, access is not restricted, except for the courses in civil engineering, medicine and dentistry (see Section 4).

In order to gain access to higher education, a student must hold an official secondary education diploma. This is awarded after six years of secondary education (in the general, technical, and artistic strand), or after a special seventh year in the vocational strand.

The current structure of education in Flanders is presented in figure 1.

Figure 1. Education in Flanders



2. A Binary Higher Education System

Higher education in Flanders consists of eight universities and 29 colleges (*hogescholen*) (for an overview, see Section 7.1.). The universities offer courses of two cycles, characterised by the integration of education and (fundamental) research. Colleges can organise courses of one cycle (vocation oriented) or two cycles (academic oriented). Both universities and colleges can offer advanced courses and continuing education. Only universities can grant PhD diplomas.

The most important decrees (Flemish laws) regarding higher education, are the decrees of 12 June and 26 June 1991 for the universities, and the decrees of 23 October 1991 and 13 July 1994 for the colleges.

In this section, we will first describe the structure of university and college education in Flanders. Second, we look at the process of amalgamation of the colleges that started in 1995. Last, we give some comments on the binary structure of higher education in Flanders.

2.1. University Education

The university course offer is laid down by decree and consists of 18 lines of study¹. These again represent some 80 recognised disciplines. Within the Flemish Community there are eight universities, but they do not all offer basic-level courses in all these lines of study. In fact, only the universities of Gent and Leuven provide a 'full' course offer (with the exception of Theology and Canon Law and Veterinary Science respectively); the other universities offer a limited number of, or a limited part of certain specialist training programmes.

In general a university training takes four years (two cycles of two years), except for lawyers, civil and agricultural engineers, business administration MA, pharmacists, dentists, psychologists, and educationalists who have to attend classes during 5 years, and physicians (general practitioners) during 7 years. A year of study consists of 1,500 to 1,800 periods of education and other activities.

Each programme consists of relatively fixed curricula, which are clearly spread over several academic years. And even though the optional subjects become more numerous during the second cycle, there is no real "credit-point system" (see also Section 6.4). Some of the subjects remain obligatory.

The first cycle leads to the "Candidate Degree", but in some cases also to the "Baccalaureus" Degree. The second cycle leads to the degree of "Licentiate", although several programmes lead to titles like "Commercial Engineer", "Physician" (medical practitioner), "Veterinarian", "Dentist", "Pharmacist", "Civil Engineer", "Civil Engineer-Architect" or "Bio-Engineer".

Complementary and advanced programmes are intended for students who have successfully completed their second cycle. Complementary programmes mainly cover subjects from basic academic fields other than that of the student's basic academic education, in order to offer a wider scope of basic abilities. In advanced programmes the student will specialise in a

¹ The Decree of 4 July 1991 specifies 18 subject areas: Philosophy, Theology and Canon Law, Philology and Literature, History, Archaeology and Arts, Law, Psychology and Educational Sciences, Economic and Applied Economic Sciences, Social Sciences, Social Health Sciences, Physical Education and Physiotherapy, Sciences, Applied Sciences, Agricultural and Applied Biological Sciences, Medicine, Dentistry, Veterinary Science, Pharmaceutical Sciences.

specific sub-field of his own basic academic education. These consist of subjects that are only available at the "third cycle" level. Complementary and advanced programmes mostly take one extra year, although some advanced programmes take two.

The doctor's degree can only be obtained by defending a dissertation at least two years after obtaining a second degree university diploma or a commercial sciences licentiate's diploma or a commercial engineer's diploma of 2-cycle higher education (the decrees specify the equivalence between the college degree 'Commercial Sciences' and the university degree 'Applied Economic Sciences').

It is quite impossible to match all these diplomas with those in other countries. But the structure of Flemish academic education can be compared to that of some other European countries (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. The structure of higher education in five European countries

Flanders	UK	France	Germany	Portugal
Kandidaat	Bachelor (3y)	DEUG DEUST Licence (3y)	Diplomvorprüfung	Bacharel
Licentiaat	Bachelor (4y) Master	Maîtrise	Lizentiat Magister Diplom Staatsprüfung	Licenciado Mestre
GAS GGS	Master	DEA DESS	Aufbaustudium Ergänzungsstudium	Mestre
Doctor	Ph.D.	Doctorat	Doktor	Doutor

Source: Ministry of the Flemish Community, Department of Education

To complete the picture, we can mention that open and distance education is not organised in Flanders. An agreement between the Dutch Open University, the Flemish universities and the government makes it possible for Flemish students to enrol in the Dutch Open University on the same conditions as the Dutch students. The Flemish universities have established study centres for the guidance and examination of the Flemish OU students.

Teacher training at universities is required to become a teacher for the 2nd, 3rd and 4th grade of secondary education, or for one-cycle higher education.

2.2. College Education

Colleges can offer courses in a spectrum of 11 lines of study, laid down by decree². There are basic training programmes of one or two cycles. The aim of one-cycle higher education is providing youngsters with practical vocational skills, based on scientifically founded knowledge, so that they are able to hold an occupation after their studies. Two-cycle higher education is academic level education. It is based on scientific knowledge. One-cycle education in colleges takes three years and leads to a 'graduate diploma'. Two-cycle education in colleges takes four years (2 + 2) or sometimes five years (2 + 3) and leads to qualifications as licentiate, industrial or commercial engineer, architect, and master of arts.

The colleges can decide themselves on the form and content of the training programmes. A year of study consists of 1,500 to 1,800 periods of teaching and other educational activities.

² The decree of 13 July 1994 specifies 11 fields of study: Architecture, Health Care, Industrial Sciences and Technology, Audio-visual and Fine Art, Music and Drama, Biotechnology, Teacher Training, Product Development, Social Work, Applied Linguistics, Commercial Sciences and Business Administration.

The colleges can also offer continuing or postgraduate training programmes. The postgraduate programmes (complementary courses) are programmes of one year of study at the least, that can be followed only by students who have already obtained a higher education diploma. The colleges can decide autonomously on the number and kind of postgraduate courses they want to offer.

Teacher training for nursery school teachers, primary school teachers, 1st and 2nd grade secondary education and all grades of vocational secondary education is provided by colleges.

Students who have obtained a college diploma and who enrol in a university course, can receive study time reductions or exemptions from examinations for parts of the academic course (at the most the equivalent of one year of study).

2.3. The Amalgamation of Colleges

With the Decree on Colleges of 23 October 1991, that created a legal framework for two-cycle colleges comparable to the university regulations, the Flemish government in fact announced a reform of the entire non-university higher education sector in Flanders. The government perceived as problematic not only the planning and the spread of the courses in colleges, but also the number of colleges. It thought that the colleges (163 in total) were too small to guarantee quality in an international context. "The content of the courses in higher education outside the universities has to be re-examined, among other things in the light of their relevance for the labour market. The high quality requirements posed on them in the future on the technical field and in the field of social skills and flexibility, here too will make a merger necessary." (Ministerie van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap, 1992: 3)

The Decree of 13 July 1994 reformed the Flemish college sector (both one-cycle and two-cycle) thoroughly. The main goals of the reform that started in September 1995 were:

- the creation of larger units;
- the reorganisation of the number of courses;
- improving the cost-effectiveness of the colleges (the share of the expenditure for personnel may not exceed 85% and has to decrease to 80% in 2002);
- increasing the autonomy of the enlarged units (enabling policy making at the level of the institution and making it responsible for its policies);
- promoting collaboration between colleges and between colleges and universities;
- enhancing the competitiveness of the institutions;
- extending the mission of the colleges with research and community-based services;
- enhancing quality (see Section 5).

The creation of larger units was triggered by a reform of the financing system of the colleges. Instead of earmarked funds a lump-sum financing system was established (a closed envelope or fixed overall budget for all colleges), that gave the colleges much freedom in using the money. The minimal size of a college, necessary to be eligible for subsidy, and the minimal number of students required in basic courses at several places of residence, made co-operation necessary. This resulted in a merger of colleges, reducing the number from 163 to 29. The smallest college in Flanders (excluding the nautical college of the Flemish Community) now has 661 students in the basic courses, the biggest 10,425 (academic year 1997-1998; Ministry of the Flemish Community, Department of Education). The amalgamations and the stipulations in the decrees of the fields of study in which courses can be offered, have improved the transparency of the course supply considerably.

The distribution of the fixed overall budget among the colleges follows three criteria:

- the historical cost of the college;
- the student numbers (the mean of the last five years);
- the education load, i.e. student numbers (the mean of the last three years) weighted according to the cost of each student for the college.

The historical cost (with 1995 as year of reference) will be reduced from 100% to 20% in five years. The definitive financing mechanism will become effective in 2006 and will be based for 50% on the historical costs and for 50% on weighted student numbers.

The lump sum each college receives includes both personnel costs and operational costs. Each college is free to use the money it receives as it wishes. Governmental control on the legality and financial orthodoxy of the colleges' expenses is carried out in retrospect. For this ex post control a board of commissioners was established.

2.4. Unity or Diversity ?

From 1970 onwards (law of 7 July 1970) higher education in Flanders was conceived as a unity in three modalities. Each form of higher education (university education, college education of one cycle and college education of two cycles) had its own task and identity. With the decrees of 1991 and 1994, higher education evolved into a binary structure.

The way in which the role of each of these types of higher education is conceived at the same time stresses the unity and the diversity, as becomes clear in the definition of the mission of universities and colleges in the respective decrees.

Art. 4 of the Decree of 24 July 1991: "Universities should, in the interest of society, be simultaneously active in the field of academic education, scientific research and scientific service provision."

Art. 3 of the Decree of 13 July 1994: "Colleges should, in the interest of society, be simultaneously active in the field of college education, social service provision and, where appropriate, project-based scientific research in collaboration with a university or other body in this country or abroad. The development and practice of the arts will also be the task of the colleges, which will organise courses in the fields of audio-visual and plastic art, music and drama. The provision of college education will be the primary task of the college."

The unity can be seen in that college education is conceived as being 'of an academic level' so transfers from colleges to universities are possible, and the regulations concerning the colleges are derived from the regulations concerning the universities. Hence, for the restructuring of the college sector "the same philosophy with analogous starting points" was used that was the basis for the decree on universities. In consideration of the specific role colleges have to play, they were given autonomy, responsibility and a structure similar to the universities (i.e. with a board of directors, an academic council, departments, and so on). In a large number of formal areas (for example entrance requirements, the possibility of distance education and part-time education, and the quality control system) the legal regulations hardly differ between the colleges and the universities. Therefore, and because of the 'vocational drift' of the universities and the 'academic drift' of the colleges, their relationship is becoming competitive as far as recruiting students and attracting private funding is concerned.

Another element of unity is the wish to lessen the impact of ideological differences between institutions on policy making. That is why the state institutions were given independent status and why the same regulations as for the so-called free institutions now apply to them (see Section 3). The structure of the state institutions is still fixed by decree, in contrast with that of the free institutions, for which only the democratic representation of the students and the staff is regulated by decree.

The diversity of the different types of higher education emerges mainly in the different roles assigned to them. Universities provide academic education and do research. Colleges offer education of an academic level but have to strive to develop closer ties with working life. If colleges do research, it must be limited to project research.

3. State and Private Higher Education

3.1. Educational Networks

The freedom of education guaranteed by the Belgian Constitution (see Section 1.2) renders the organisation of educational networks possible. They come under the Communities, provinces, municipalities and other public law persons and also under private persons, de facto associations and non-profit associations.

Traditionally, three networks are distinguished:

- Community education: education organised on behalf of the Flemish Community. The Constitution forces Community education to be neutral; this means that the religious, philosophical or ideological conviction of parents and pupils must be respected;
- subsidised official education: includes provincial and municipal education; a school of this network can be denominational or not;
- subsidised private education: education provided by private initiative, a private person or a private organisation. It includes denominational (mainly Catholic) and non-denominational private education and independent schools that apply specific instructional methods.

The educational networks have extensive autonomy. They are free to develop their own curricula and schedules, provided they are approved by the Flemish Minister of Education. They are free to choose their instructional methods.

In compulsory education, 68.8% of all pupils is in subsidised private education, 16.4% is in Community education and 14.8% attends classes in subsidised official education (figures for 1995-1996; Ministry of the Flemish Community, Department of Education).

When we look at the 29 colleges that were established after the mergers of 1995, we get the following picture (see also Section 7.1):

- five new colleges are 'autonomous'. All, except one, used to belong to the official education network (the former state or Community schools);
- three colleges are governed by provinces;
- 20 colleges belong to the 'free', i.e. denominational education network and operate under private law;
- one college (the Antwerp Nautical College) works under the direct authority of the Minister of Education and offers bilingual courses (Dutch/French).

In the field of university education, distinctions between educational networks are, on historical grounds, non-existent. Flemish universities can be categorised on the basis of their

philosophical background, but they are all officially recognised by the Flemish Government and accept candidates of any philosophical conviction.

3.2. Government Control and Educational Networks

In the period before 1989, that is the year in which the Communities became responsible for education (see Section 1.1), governmental control of higher education institutions - in fact, of all education institutions - took on different forms with regard to state vs. 'free' institutions. In higher education, this control also differed for universities and colleges.

State universities were steered in a very centralist way. They were directly under the responsibility of the Minister of Education, who was the organising authority of state education. Therefore, these universities were influenced directly by the features of the political system of the time, which was unstable due to linguistic troubles³ and financially restricted because of the increasing public debt.

The 'free', i.e. denominational universities were relatively autonomous. According to Verhoeven (1982: 131), this can be explained by university education always having been seen as necessarily autonomous and organised by private initiative and because it was clear that interventions could trigger irreconcilable conflicts. The government was reluctant to regulate, in order not to upset the delicate ideological and linguistic equilibrium in the university sector.

For the colleges, a completely different picture emerges. Originally established as an extension to secondary education, they were upgraded to become tertiary education institutions after the Second World War. But they were still covered by the School Pact Law of 29 May 1959, which in fact regulated secondary education. Under the terms of this law, state education was financed entirely by the state. Subsidised schools on the other hand received grants for their operations, while the salaries of their personnel, though not civil servants, were immediately paid for by the government. In exchange for this governmental funding, the government received the right to control the curricula and the quality of the education of the subsidised schools. 'Free' non-state colleges had more space for autonomous decision making than did the state colleges.

3.3. Reduced Influence of the Educational Networks

In Flanders, the view took hold that Flanders could 'do differently and better'. The constitutional reform of 1989 provided the Flemish Community with the opportunity to reform thoroughly all sectors of education. Subsequently, several decrees were issued, with autonomy, responsibility, and scaling-up being the leading ideas. With the Decree on Universities of 1991 and the Decree on Colleges of 1994, the government took an important step towards achieving far-reaching autonomy for all institutions. The decrees imposed only formal requirements (length of the course, division in cycles, ability to abridge the course duration, and so on); the content of education (the course programme) could be decided by the institutions themselves. The new legislation made the former state universities autonomous and gave them (almost) the same responsibilities as the 'free' universities; higher education rules as a whole (including college education) became more integrated.

The way of governmental steering of higher education after 1989 differs greatly from the previous period. An important change is that the steering is now almost the same towards all

³ Belgium has three language groups: Dutch-speaking (57.5%), French-speaking (32.4%), and German-speaking (0.7%); there is also an official bilingual region: Brussels (9.3%).

higher education institutions. With the special decree of 26 June 1991 the former state universities became their own organising body and their autonomy became largely the same as that of free universities. The regulation on colleges was conceived very similar to that of universities and granted them a similar independence.

4. Access to Higher Education in Flanders

4.1. Opening up Higher Education for the Masses

Free access to all forms of higher education is a long standing tradition in Belgium and Flanders. To improve access to higher education, a number of measures were taken to remove financial and material barriers (see below). As a result of these measures, and of demographic and social factors, higher education evolved into mass-education. Since 1960-61, the number of students in higher education in Flanders has increased more than fivefold in university education and more than fourfold in college education (see also Section 7.2). In the 1994-95 academic year, 9.7% of the Flemish population participated in higher education, compared to an average in the OECD of 9.4% (Ministry of the Flemish Community, 1998: 236). The proportion of higher-education graduates in the Flemish population is also high. Among 25- to 34-years-olds, 32% have higher-education diplomas, while the average in the OECD is 23% (Ministry of the Flemish Community, 1998: 324).

We will now describe a number of characteristics of the Flemish educational system that make access to higher education in Flanders very liberal.

The system of study grants

Since 1954, indigent students have been able to apply for study grants - as in secondary education - in the form of government loans or payments. Flemish students can receive a study grant when the income of their parents does not exceed a certain limit (dependent on the number of chargeable persons). The amount of the grant varies with the income height. The study grants have been adapted to the increase of the prices annually since 1994-1995. In the future this adaptation will take place automatically.

23% of the students receive direct financial support (De Groof & Van Haver, 1995: 46). On average they receive 48,982 BEF (732.17 Euro) (Ministry of the Flemish Community, Department of Education). Students who are liable for a grant, can also enjoy other advantages. Their parents can get a child allowance (until the student is 25 years old) and can enjoy a tax reduction. The students get reduced fees on public transportation and can use the welfare facilities of the universities and the colleges. They get a reduction on enrolment fees.

The Omnivalence Law

Since the Omnivalence Law (*Omnivalentiewet*) of 1964 everybody with a secondary education diploma has access to higher education. An exception is made for secondary vocational education. This only gives access to higher education when an additional (seventh) year is passed successfully.

Most pupils in secondary education choose a general education course: In the 1997-98 school year 40.2% of the pupils in the second and third cycle were enrolled in general education. The most logical step for these pupils is to enrol in higher education.

The geographical spread of universities

The geographical spread of universities (more precise, of some university courses; see also Section 2.1) in the second half of the 1960s, which resulted in each province having a

university institution, was meant to enhance access to higher education. Afterwards, findings showed that this goal was reached only partially (Verhoeven, 1982).

Restrictions to tuition fees

In the decrees minimum and maximum amounts are fixed for tuition fees. The basic amounts are 2,500 and 10,000 BEF (37.37 Euro and 149.48 Euro) for colleges, 10,000 and 14,500 BEF (149.48 Euro and 216.74 Euro) for universities (these basic amounts are adapted to the evolution of the consumption prizes; the maximum amounts are at present 14,000 BEF (209.27 Euro) for colleges and 18,500 BEF (276.53 Euro) for universities). For post-graduate courses the amount is free.

Free enrolment

No central limit is placed on the number of student enrolments in higher education institutions. Moreover these institutions are financed partly on the basis of student numbers.

No entrance exams

In higher education there are no entrance exams, with a few exceptions. At universities, entrance exams are provided for civil engineering and, since 1997, medicine and dentistry. Colleges provide an artistic entrance exam for courses in audio-visual and fine arts, and music and drama, and an ability test for the course in nautical sciences.

4.2. The Other Side of the Coin

Although the entrance exams limit the free access partly, the freedom to enrol in higher education is very large. The choice of study can be made by the student himself / herself. This freedom of choice has led to patterns of choice comparable with other European countries (see for example Verhoeven & Beuselinck, 1996: 20-43). Courses that provide good job opportunities, like Economics, Engineering, and Law, have high enrolment numbers, whereas courses with low job opportunities (courses that serve education and the administration) are less popular.

It is also important to know that a higher education diploma still is a guarantee for a well-paid job. That makes it understandable that more and more young people enter higher education: 54.3% of all 18 year olds enrolls in one form or another of higher education (Auditcommissie, 1998: 199).

The high enrolment rate in higher education causes, however, a problem of low pass rates. The other side of the picture of free access to higher education is the high number of students failing to complete higher education. Only 47% of the freshmen eventually graduate at university (Ministerie van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap, 1999: 193).

In the view of the Flemish government, the institutions themselves (and secondary education schools) are responsible for optimising their efforts to increase the pass rates of their students. Nevertheless, it has included an article in the Decree on Universities of 1991, imposing that 5% of all academic staff has to deliver specific educational guidance to first year students. The provisional policy letter of the Minister of Education (Vanderpoorten, 2000: 46) retains the preoccupation with the maintenance of existing guidance systems for first year students, course selection counselling in secondary education, and the enhancement of the transition from secondary to higher education. The audit commission (see Section 5), however, has put into question the guidance systems in higher education (Auditcommissie, 1998: 14). It questions especially the extensive guidance in the first year, because a large number of

students still does not pass, in spite of the guidance system. The consequences of these remarks for the policy of the Flemish government are not yet clear.

5. The Quality Assessment System

Granting autonomy and responsibility to all institutions of higher education is the most important instrument for the Flemish government for guaranteeing the quality of higher education in an international context. This is based on the view that autonomous institutions will develop modern, dynamic, and professional management, and therefore will be more able to adapt dynamically to changing demand and European initiatives.

To verify the effects of autonomy on the quality of education, the Flemish government imposed the development of a quality assurance system. Given the different development of universities and colleges of higher education and their different relationship with the government (see Section 3), the actual establishment of such a system was quite different for the universities than for the colleges.

5.1. Quality Assessment in Universities

The Decree of 12 June 1991, together with the Decree of 26 June 1991, which specified the status of the former state universities, brought the regulations regarding the entire university sector into one coherent framework. This decree obliged all Flemish universities to develop a system of quality assurance. More specifically, it stated in Article 122 (as amended by the Decree on Education X of 18 May 1999) that each university has to provide both internal and external quality assurance, meaning that it must:

- monitor the quality of its education and research activities on a continual basis;
- set up a system of regular evaluations (at least every 8 years) with other universities in Flanders and abroad (these evaluations have to be made public);
- take account of the results of the evaluations in its policy (and report on this in its annual report for the Flemish government).

The role of the government is defined in Article 123 (as amended): it monitors and controls the quality assessment system by examining the quality assurance program set up by the universities, by appointing a commission to do comparative research on the quality of the education activities in a particular course or courses, and by monitoring the way in which universities take account of the evaluations in their policies.

If the quality of a course turns out to be enduringly unsatisfactory, the government can either stop subsidising the university in question for the students in that course or it can withdraw the right of the university to grant an academic degree for that course.

A meta-evaluation by the government took place in 1997 when the Minister of Education appointed an independent commission of experts. This audit commission had to verify whether the universities had complied with the quality assurance obligations as defined by the Universities Decree of 1991. On the basis of its research and its visits to the universities, the audit commission concluded (Auditcommissie, 1998: 13) that this was indeed the case, notwithstanding the different ways of taking care of quality assurance in each university and despite a number of areas that the commission found could be improved.

Even before the Universities Decree of 1991 was passed, the universities already conferred within the Flemish Inter-university Council about how to establish a quality-assurance system.

The Flemish Inter-university Council (*Vlaamse Interuniversitaire Raad*) was established in 1976 to promote consultation and co-operation between the universities and to be an advisory body towards the Ministers of Education and Science Policy in university matters. The Flemish Inter-university Council is composed of the vice-chancellors of all the Flemish universities and a supplementary member from the two large universities. In a number of matters, the Decree on Universities of 12 June 1991 has made the advice of the Flemish Inter-university Council mandatory.

In a similar matter, the Flemish Colleges Council (*Vlaamse Hogescholen Raad*) was established to promote consultation between the colleges, to defend their interests, and to advise the Minister of Education in college matters. It consists of the general directors of all the colleges. The Decree of 7 July 1998 gave the Flemish Colleges Council the same status as the Flemish Inter-university Council. The Flemish Inter-university Council is also the model for the way in which the Flemish Colleges Council should work and function in the future.

The less advanced state of the development of quality assurance in the colleges as compared to the universities, especially concerning the external quality assurance, can be attributed for a large part to the relative youth of the Flemish Colleges Council in the college sector when compared to the length of time the Flemish Inter-university Council has played an important role for the university sector.

The Flemish universities reached agreement with the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) to implement the Dutch review system in Flanders, in mutual co-operation. The first review was carried out in 1990, and, since 1991, all reviews are based on this co-operation between the Flemish Inter-university Council and the Dutch VSNU.

The review system consists of elements of both internal and external quality assurance. A review takes a course or group of related courses (both academic and advanced academic courses) as its point of departure and is carried out in all the universities offering that particular course or group of courses. The review process starts with a self-evaluation. Each of the relevant study fields at each university has to write a self-study, reporting the results of a critical self-analysis by all groups associated with the course (professors, assistants, and students). On the basis of this self-study, a review committee, consisting of experts who are not employed by any of the faculties concerned, has to determine if a course achieves the objectives set at the outset. For this task, it can use the self-study carried out by the specific faculty, recent evaluation reports, student surveys, courses, text books, visits to the faculties, discussions with interested parties, and so on. The committee then drafts a course report designed to enable each faculty to keep on improving its quality. The faculties have the opportunity to comment on the report. Once all the faculties in a particular field of study have been examined, a general report is produced in which various aspects of the education provided by the institution are placed in a comparative perspective. The final report, comprising a general section and the course reports, is also intended to inform the Flemish Community about the status of education in the specific field of study.

5.2. Quality Assessment in Colleges

The quality assurance system in the sector of the colleges of higher education, as it is now established by the Decree of 13 July 1994 (as amended by the Decree on Education X of 18 May 1999), is very similar to that in the university sector. Each college has to provide both internal and external quality assurance and therefore must monitor the quality of its education

and research activities continuously. It also has to set up a system of regular evaluations together with other colleges in Flanders and abroad. The results of the evaluations, carried out at least each 5 years for one-cycle courses and each 8 years for two-cycle courses, must be made public and must be reported in the annual report to the Flemish government (Article 58, as amended).

The role of the government is also defined in accordance with the university regulations (Article 59, as amended) and thus involves the same elements of examining the quality assurance system of the colleges, comparative research, and monitoring college policies with regard to the results of the evaluations.

Enduring insufficient quality of a course can lead to not including the students in that course in the governmental grant for the college or to withdrawing the right of the college to grant a college degree for that course.

The actual way in which quality assurance is imposed on the colleges of higher education, however, is not the same as for universities. Moreover, within the college sector, the system evolved differently for one-cycle and two-cycle courses.

Several reasons account for this particular situation. The historical ties between (especially one-cycle) colleges and secondary education accounts for the virtual absence of a real quality culture in colleges. The large number of colleges also made quality control difficult. The government tried to change this situation by bringing about mergers in the college sector. With the colleges decree of 1994 and the subsequent mergers, all colleges were now obliged to set up a quality assurance system with both internal and external aspects.

The situation of the one-cycle courses was, however, a special case.⁴ Until 1999, these courses were subject to a higher-education inspectorate, that is, a team of officials from the Department of Education and experts, who analysed the strengths and weaknesses of a particular course. The inspectorate was also responsible for elementary, secondary, and part-time art education but not for universities and two-cycle courses in colleges (for the latter, the system was abolished in 1991). From 1999 until the academic year 2002-2003, the Flemish government will evaluate the quality of one-cycle courses itself on the basis of a comparative quality survey by an external committee of experts appointed by the Minister of Education. After this period, the one-cycle courses will fall under the general system as set out by the Colleges Decree of 1994.

For two-cycle courses, no external evaluation has yet been carried out, but recently an agreement was concluded with the Flemish Colleges Council for organising reviews in the sense of the Colleges Decree of 1994. Note that the meta-evaluation by the government has not been initiated neither for one-cycle nor for two-cycle courses.

As for internal quality assurance, most colleges have set up a system based on the EFQM standard (European Foundation for Quality Management), although different applications are used.

⁴ This is exemplified by the appointment of an inspector-general responsible for the inspectorate after the mergers. When this inspector-general retired in 1999, the inspectorate was abolished.

5.3. Quality Assurance and (Unequal) Governmental Control

The normative conception of the Flemish government on the quality of higher education clearly is based on a neo-liberal, neo-conservative value system. From this, it argues in favour of far-reaching autonomy for the institutions of higher education but financed primarily by the government and obliged to account for their use of the funds received. Bearing responsibility consists of, among other things, taking care of quality, in particular establishing structures for carrying out quality assurance systematically.

However, it took ten years to implement this policy in higher education. Autonomy and responsibility were key words in the government's policy right from the moment the Flemish Community acquired the authority over education (January 1, 1989). The rules laying down a similar quality assurance policy for all institutions of higher education in Flanders were only recently completed, with the Decree on Education X of May 18, 1999. How can we explain this time gap?

In the history of higher education in Flanders, two historical distinctions are important for understanding the current differential governmental higher education policy (see also Section 3.2). In general, universities had more autonomy vis à vis the government than colleges of higher education, and, second, state institutions had less autonomy than non-state ('free') institutions. In other words, the Belgian governmental steering mechanisms have always varied, and not all institutions were familiar with the autonomy granted by the new decrees. The Flemish government had to take all this into account and could only gradually overcome the historical distinctions.

In this way, the unequal implementation of the new policy philosophy of the Flemish government can be more easily explained. Because of the larger independence of universities in comparison with the colleges (for example, the universities started co-operating in the Flemish Inter-university Council already in 1976), it was almost self-evident to change the university regulations first. This is what happened in 1991. At the same time, the differences between state and non-state universities were for a large part undone - leading to a difficult search for a new balance of power within the former state institutions.

The re-arrangement of the regulations for the colleges of higher education proceeded in two phases due to the diverse nature of colleges offering one-cycle courses, and those organising two-cycle courses. In 1991, the laws governing two-cycle courses were already adapted in line with the new decree on universities. The major reform, however took place in 1994 when both types of courses were brought within the same framework of rules. The subsequent mergers, the introduction of new tasks (doing research, providing services), the establishment of a quality assurance system, etc. were drastic changes, especially for one-cycle courses (which traditionally remained close to secondary education), and for former state institutions.

The consequence of this differential governmental steering policy for quality assurance is the unequal position of the institutions with regard to the establishment of a quality assurance system. Nevertheless, governmental policy has consistently been imposing a quality assurance system on the universities and the colleges and evaluating the systems set up by the institutions. This evaluation has taken the form of, among other things, an audit commission for university education that compared the quality assurance structures of the different universities and the obligation for all institutions of higher education to report annually on their efforts and achievements concerning the quality of their education. The institutions now

are responsible for quality assurance, must account publicly for it, and can, therefore, be more easily scrutinised by their 'clients' in function of educational quality.

The Flemish government has undoubtedly enlarged the scope for autonomous decision making by the institutions of higher education. It has withdrawn from direct control. But, indirectly, the government still has considerable influence. It compelled the institutions of higher education to establish a fully fledged quality assurance system. This was related to its aim of increasing the transparency of the course supply and the obligation for the institutions to report annually about quality measures related to the reviews. Thus, it has brought about important changes in all institutions of higher education. The quality assurance initiatives already present in universities were expanded and systematised; in the colleges, quality assurance systems comparable to those of the universities were established. These changes thus were not the result of a 'minimal role' taken by the government. Although important, the model of the market state (i.e. a state model implying a minimum role of the state, with policy being the result of bilateral agreements between governmental actors and social actors; see Olsen, 1988) in Flanders is still more theory than a fully realised, policy-making principle.

6. Main Problems in the Flemish Higher Education System

The main problems in the Flemish higher education system, and the main issues addressed by the Flemish government, are:

- the quality of higher education;
- the rationalisation and optimisation of the course supply;
- new educational structures for working-learning relationships;
- the European dimension;
- governmental control.

We will discuss each of these issues in more detail, often with references to the previous sections. To conclude, we will point out the direction in which we think the higher education system in Flanders will develop in the future.

6.1. Quality as the Main Issue

Higher education in Flanders has undergone major changes in the last decade. With the constitutional reform of 1988, the Flemish Community became responsible for Dutch-speaking education in Belgium (see Section 1.1). This led to a new higher-education policy based on the principles of deregulation, autonomy, and accountability. The reforms involved both the universities (1991) and the colleges of higher education (1991 and especially 1994).

One of the key elements of the new higher-education regulations is the quality-assessment system (see also Section 5). This exemplifies best the government's policy of granting all higher education institutions autonomy, making them responsible for their policies, while still keeping the quality of higher education somewhat under governmental control.

The expectation is, that implicit goals can best be achieved by creating a framework of rules that gives higher education institutions a large amount of freedom and possibilities to adapt, in their own way and according to their own insights, to economic and social demands. After all, the quality of the educational supply and the pass rates (see Section 4.2) can have a negative effect on the level of training of the Flemish working population. The supply of courses in that case would not fit the needs of the labour market. This in turn can have implications for the position of Flanders in the Europe of the 21st century.

In other words, from 1989 onwards, the policy of the Flemish government has been focused on applying the concepts of quality, autonomy, and deregulation to the higher education sector. By abandoning detailed central regulation and opting instead for a policy confined to creating the right conditions for maximising the policy space on the local institutional level, the Flemish government hopes to increase the quality of higher education. What the content of this 'quality' must be is not clearly stated. But increasing international competition is often mentioned along with the need for institutions of higher education to be strong enough to meet in this competition. However, this does not mean that the specific role of higher education (offering education at a high level) should be diluted, for the content of education cannot depend on the volatile demands of students and employers. It is not wrong for institutions of higher education to establish new courses or change the content of existing programmes to meet changing demands, but they have to remember that they must always offer high quality education.

6.2. Rationalisation and Optimisation

Taking the viewpoint that higher education must be competitive in an international context, and that the rise of the knowledge society also requires high quality degree programmes, the Flemish government wants to increase the rationality of the course supply in higher education. The Flemish government, however, does not intervene directly in the course supply nor in the content of the courses. Instead, it has set out a number of intermediate goals.

First, the Flemish government wants to improve the transparency of the university course supply. The opacity of the university course supply makes it difficult for potential employers to know the particular knowledge and skills of graduates. The relative value of courses and diplomas is not always clear. Next to this, the lack of transparency can cause problems for candidate students making a choice of study. More general, a lack of transparency results in an inadequate link between higher education courses and the labour market (Van Heffen & Huisman, 1998).

Second, the existence of inferior courses is touched upon. The former Flemish minister of Education has stated several times (Van Den Bossche, 1995 and 1998) that the idea of a 'full' university, i.e. a university offering courses in all lines of study, is outdated. Instead, universities must strive to become 'valuable'. In other words: they have to become centres of excellence in both education and research. As a consequence of this concept of a valuable university, the universities should not keep qualitatively inferior courses. However, other than the obligation to establish a quality assurance system (see Section 5) no direct policy instrument to achieve this goal is formulated. Here the Flemish government seems primarily to 'manage by speech', a technique that it seems to use often towards higher education. Colleges for their part can replace an option on a course by another option. After an evaluation and from the academic year 1999-2000 onwards, each college can also replace a basic course for another basic course in a study domain in which it may offer courses. Both possibilities, which grant the colleges the authority to replace an inferior or less successful option or course by a better one, are established by decree, and this policy will be maintained by the current government (Vanderpoorten, 2000: 10).

Third, to arrive at a more rational and well-balanced supply of courses, the Flemish government conferred with the vice-chancellors of the universities. They have agreed principally on 'freezing' a number of university courses, that is abolishing them but with the possibility of re-establishing them. Also, again in consultation with the vice-chancellors, the Flemish government has proposed to integrate certain courses. Until now, only one example

can be mentioned, namely the partial integration of the courses Theology and Religious Science.

A problem implicitly stated in the context of the erosion of knowledge and rapidly changing knowledge, is the structure of lifelong learning. This is seen as one of the great challenges of the next decades (Van Den Bossche, 1995: 8). Here too the government seems in favour of giving as much autonomy to the institutions as possible, to provide them with the possibility to adapt their supply dynamically to the rising demand (Ministerie van de Vlaamse Gemeenschap, 1996: 110).

In fact the traditional characteristics of the Flemish higher educational structure, that reduce its adaptiveness to the international competition, are put into question. The system has to become more effective and efficient and impediments from the past must be taken away. The assignment of two special government commissioners to develop plans for the optimisation of university and college education respectively, can be understood in this context. The university commissioner started in 1995 and had to develop a plan for the optimisation of university education in consultation with the vice-chancellors in five years time. He had to report regularly to the Minister of Education about the progress he made, which resulted in three official reports. The commissioner for the colleges of higher education, on the other hand, started in 1998 and has only come up with an interim report. Although his task was not finished, when a new Minister of Education took office following the elections of 1999, he was discharged. This has made the status of the reports of both commissioners unclear.

Attention now is being focused more on the declarations of Sorbonne⁵ and Bologna⁶ and their consequences for Flemish higher education (Vanderpoorten, 2000: 11). The intention to develop a bachelor/master structure, i.e. a system of three plus two years, implies a thorough reform of higher education courses in Flanders, because most are conceived as two plus two or three years.

Finally, by merging the colleges the government wanted to improve the quality of education of these institutions. Indeed, the high number of colleges and courses caused a lot of dissatisfaction among both the professional world of the college graduates and some members of the colleges staff. The large number of institutions and of courses at any rate made quality control difficult. In 1994 the Flemish government changed the financing system of the colleges. Instead of earmarked funds a lump-sum financing system was established, granting the colleges much freedom in using the money. But because this new financing system was partly based on the number of students, it resulted in a merger of colleges (see Section 2.3). The amalgamations - a process which is not finished yet - and the stipulation in the decree of the fields of study each college may offer, have improved the transparency of the course supply considerably.

6.3. New Educational Structures for Working-Learning Relationships

The Flemish government finds lifelong learning or continuing training a prerequisite for the good functioning of a modern society, but it does not think it to be its responsibility to develop an educational structure in this field. Rather it wants to create the conditions in which the higher education institutions can organise such a structure (see also Section 6.2). Nevertheless, the Flemish government has taken some steps to promote structures for working-learning relationships.

⁵ 'Joint Declaration on Harmonisation of the Architecture of the European Higher Education System' (25 May 1998)

⁶ 'The European Higher Education Area' (19 June 1999)

The financing system provides funding for some 6,400 students in higher education for social advancement (*hoger onderwijs voor sociale promotie*). Higher education for social advancement takes place outside normal working hours. It concerns mostly one cycle courses, often structured in modules. This type of education provides people with professional experience with the opportunity to enhance their professional skills or to obtain a diploma in a field not related to their profession.

The rather rigid exam system in Flanders offers possibilities for lifelong learning in the form of distance education and part time education. Part time higher education means that the student enrolls for half of the programme of a full time student. Distance higher education means taking exams without attending courses. Special arrangements can be made for practicals and so on. Since 1994 this is possible for all courses at universities and colleges.

Another initiative was the introduction and financing of the post-graduate courses (complementary courses and specialist courses) (see Sections 2.1 and 2.2). The funding of these courses is not depending on the number of participants but on the number of diplomas (output-financing).

The involvement of external stakeholders in internal processes of the higher education institutions is guaranteed by decree. Already since the Law of 24 March 1971 social and economic organisations, as well as communal and provincial authorities are also part of the Board of Directors of the universities. In colleges there is a comparable democratic governance structure, that is a representation of personnel, students, governing bodies, and the socio-economic and cultural milieus.

Partnerships between higher education institutions and business are organised by decree in such a way, that the interests of the educational institutions are guarded, that their costs are remunerated, and that they get their rightful share of the profit.

Colleges have to offer their students a period of practical training in a firm and are obliged to draft vocational profiles and course profiles. The vocational profile describes what someone does in a certain profession and which skills, knowledge and attitudes are required to be able to practice that profession. On the basis of the vocational profiles, course profiles are drafted. The course profile describes which skills, supporting knowledge and attitudes one should learn someone. The responsibility for establishing course profiles lies with the educational field itself and is guaranteed by the structural co-operation between the educational field and the socio-economic field.

6.4. The European Dimension

The government wants Flemish education to be competitive in an international context. That is why it makes the quality of higher education a priority policy issue (see Section 6.1). For the same reason some measures were taken to promote the internationalisation (in a broad sense) of higher education.

To promote the participation of Flemish higher education institutions and students in European educational programmes, the Flemish government has established several agencies. The Socrates Committee is an advisory body that aims at enhancing the Flemish participation in the Socrates-programme. It also has to ensure the coherence of all European programmes at the Flemish level. The Flemish Socrates Agency co-ordinates the implementation of the

Socrates-Programme. Likewise, there is a Flemish Lingua Agency for the Lingua-programme and a Flemish Leonardo da Vinci Agency for the Leonardo-programme.

Next to the funding made available by the European Union for study grants in the framework of the Erasmus-programme, the Flemish Community provides additional funding to finance the Erasmus activities. This additional funding has increased over the years and amounted 31 million BEF (463378.18 Euro) in 1997-98.

In Flanders the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) was introduced. The ECTS is a system for the recognition of study periods abroad by the higher education institution in the home country. In participating institutions the student work load for a course is expressed in 60 credits a year, subdivided according to the weight of the course units. This system makes it easier to measure and compare the study results of students and to transfer them between institutions.

The Flemish government also provides money to promote universities and colleges concluding international co-operation agreements. Some examples:

- Since 1993 the Flemish government provides 130 million BEF (1,943,198.80 Euro) a year to encourage research institutions (i.e. universities) to participate in European research programmes.
- In 1998 98.2 million BEF (1,467,862.48 Euro) was provided for international university co-operation projects in the field of education (with Russia, Ukraine, Vietnam and China as priority partners).
- Six co-operation projects within the framework of the "*transborder agreement*" (an agreement between the Netherlands, Flanders, Nordrhein-Westfalen, Nieder-Saksen, and Bremen) are co-financed by the Flemish government for 7.5 million BEF (112,107.62 Euro) in 1997-1998 and 9.5 million BEF (142,002.99 Euro) the next year.

Another series of measures aims specifically to enhance the participation of foreign students in Flemish higher education. In accordance with the relevant European regulations, students of other EU-countries who study in Belgium, have the same rights to subsidies as Belgian students. Furthermore, the European directives of 21 December 1989 and 24 July 1992 concerning a general system of recognition of higher education diplomas, concluding a vocational training (respectively of three years or more and less than three years), were implemented in Flanders. The basic principle is that such diplomas are recognised, but exceptions are possible.

Other foreign diplomas or certificates can be recognised by the Flemish government as equivalent with the degrees laid down in the decrees. The recognition of the full equivalence grants the same judicial consequences to these diplomas or certificates then to the degrees with which they correspond.

Finally, autonomy in formulating educational programmes and the organisation of the academic year, grants higher education institutions the possibility to take the educational programmes and time schedules of foreign students into account.

The individually tailored year programme (*individueel aangepast jaarprogramma*) grants the possibility to a student to enrol for a course year in which he/she was unsuccessful, but did attain exemptions or transfer of exam results, and supplement this by course units of the next year.

From the above it is clear that the internationalisation of higher education is taking off in Flanders. But the lingua franca of higher education still is Dutch. Participation in higher education can be made dependent on a language exam. In principle foreigners have to show

that they understand enough Dutch to follow courses. The decrees of 1991 and 1994 do create the possibility to lecture in another language (20% of the lectures in universities, unlimited in colleges). Post-academic education also can be (and often is) taught in another language.

6.5. Governmental Control

The Minister of Education has spoken of a “new policy philosophy, a philosophy that rests on a totally new relationship between the government and education, whereby the government sets out the beacons of the policy, provides means for the realisations of this policy (envelope financing), and grants the widest possible freedom to education for this realisation.” (Vlaamse Raad, 1994: 10).

The government does however not withdraw entirely: “The government creates conditions and sets out quality goals (...) it proposes minimal goals, promotes certain social priorities, secures a number of vital interests and rights, especially for the weaker, and to that aim provides the necessary resources in exchange for clear agreements” (Van Den Bossche, 1995: 9-12). In principle control is exercised in retrospect. For that purpose a quality control system was established (see Section 5). The application of the quality assurance system, however, falls under the responsibility of the institutions themselves.

The clear decentralisation in comparison with the period before 1989 has increased the scope for autonomous decision-making by the institutions, but deserves nuance on certain points. Governmental control is not only carried out post factum, but the autonomy of the higher education institutions is limited on six other occasions as well.

A first limitation is the assignment of specific study areas and courses to certain institutions (see Sections 2.1 and 2.2). For the universities 18 lines of study are specified and for each university the courses and part of courses that it can offer are defined by decree. For the colleges 11 lines of study are specified. They can offer those basic courses and options that are appointed to them by decree. In other words, expansion is legally prohibited.

The limitation of the number of courses (the scaling-up of colleges) was a result of a governmental decision. The financing mechanism was adapted in such a way, that the small colleges had to merge (see Section 2.3). After the subsequent mergers, the number of colleges was only 29. This also involved a thorough rearrangement and integration of courses.

These two elements, restricting study areas and decreasing the number of courses, seem to be the most important limitations to the autonomy of higher education institutions, especially because they can affect the supply of courses. Theoretically the Flemish government can use this as an indirect steering instrument.

The autonomy of the institutions is limited in third place, at least theoretically, by the introduction of the study point system (see Section 6.4). In practice, however, it seems to be more a source of information for the students than an instrument for influencing the study progress (Verstegen, 1992-1993: 29).

A fourth limitation is the obligation for colleges to draw up vocational profiles and course profiles based on them (see Section 6.3). These profiles cannot be drawn up by the colleges independently, but must be construed in dialogue with the occupational field.

A fifth element is the restriction on the share of the total expenses that can be spent on wages (see also Section 2.3). This share cannot exceed (after a transition period) more than 80%. In that way at least 20% can be spent on working costs.

Concerning the financial means in general, the Flemish government finds it necessary that the basic financing of higher education comes from the government and will continue to come from the government. The Flemish government strongly believes in the necessity to pay the normal functioning of higher education with money from the government, and in the incidental nature of private financing. At this moment, the major part of the financial resources of the higher education institutions comes from the government, although the third party funding of some institutions is growing. Also in the future higher education has to be able to fulfil its essential tasks independent from private funding.

As a counterpart, higher education institutions must take the responsibility for the funding they receive from the government. The Flemish government aims at 'affordable quality' and demands that institutions make an adequate use of the money they get from the government, because the government has to take its budgetary possibilities into account. The system of an envelope (closed for colleges, half closed for universities) expresses the wish to make higher institutions accountable.

A sixth limitation of the institutional independence is the appointment of a commissioner at each university and college (see also Section 2.3)⁷. The commissioners at the universities have the authority to check if university policy is in line with the relevant laws and decrees and with the criterion of financial equilibrium of the institution. When the commissioner does not approve the policy, he appeals at the Flemish government, that decides if the university policy must be changed or not. For colleges a similar system exists. On top of this, all purchases by the university of goods and services amounting more than 1,250,000 BEF (18,684.60 Euro) have to be visaed by the commissioner. The university can take the definitive decision. Although the system of commissioners is a clear centralist element, the autonomy of the higher education institutions does not seem to be limited very much by it, because the legal regulations in Flanders grant the institutions relatively much autonomy.

6.6. Future Developments in the Flemish Higher Education System

The higher education system in Flanders has seen major developments and important changes in the last decade, for example the introduction of systematic quality assurance, the amalgamation of the colleges, and the enlarged policy-making possibilities for the higher education institutions.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that the higher education system in Flanders has now reached a period of peace and quiet. On the contrary, the traditional characteristics of the Flemish higher educational structure are put into question. With the failure of the government commissioners for the optimisation of university and college education to arrive at a proposal for the reorganisation of higher education (see Section 6.2), the principles of the declarations of Sorbonne and Bologna will now be taken as guidelines for the Flemish government's higher education policy.

The intention to develop a bachelor/master structure and an undergraduate/graduate culture implies a thorough reform of higher education courses in Flanders. Most courses at the moment are conceived as two plus two or two plus three years (see Sections 2.1 and 2.2). Transforming them into a structure of three plus two years is an attractive idea, given the

⁷ These commissioners are not to be confused with the special government commissioners for the optimisation of higher education (see Section 6.2).

international comparability and improved transparency it would bring about. However, especially for the courses of four years duration, important issues have to be considered. Must these courses be reduced to three years or extended to five years, and how is that going to happen? Is such an extension affordable for a government that still pays for the basic functioning of the higher education institutions (see Section 6.5)? Will the staff be able to cope? What will be the effects on the participation in the master-studies? And so forth.

It seems to us that these and other questions can only be answered satisfactory when the reform of the structure of higher education is placed in a broad perspective that leaves the traditional ways of thinking about higher education in Flanders behind. In other words, the rigidity that still characterises higher education in Flanders (in the first place, the year system) will have to be reconsidered, and the autonomy of the higher education institutions further enlarged.

7. Tables and Statistics

7.1. Universities and Colleges in Flanders

Table 1. Universities in Flanders

university	abbreviation	establishment
Universiteit Gent	RUG	1816
Universiteit Antwerpen	UA	
- Universitair Centrum Antwerpen	RUCA	1965
- Universitaire Instelling Antwerpen	UIA	1972
- Universitaire Faculteiten Sint-Ignatius Antwerpen	UFSIA	1965
Limburgs Universitair Centrum	LUC	1971
Vrije Universiteit Brussel	VUB	1834 (1969)
Katholieke Universiteit Leuven	KUL	1425
Katholieke Universiteit Brussel	KUB	1868 (1969)

Table 2. Colleges in Flanders

Autonomous colleges	Hogeschool Antwerpen
	Erasmushogeschool Brussel
	Hogeschool Limburg
	Hogeschool Gent
	Hogeschool West-Vlaanderen
Provincial colleges	Hogeschool van de Provincie Antwerpen
	Provinciale Hogeschool Limburg
	Mercator Hogeschool Provincie Oost-Vlaanderen
Free colleges	Handelshogeschool Antwerpen
	Karel De Grote Hogeschool
	Katholieke Vlaamse Hogeschool Antwerpen
	Katholieke Hogeschool Kempen
	Katholieke Hogeschool Mechelen
	Economische Hogeschool Sint-Aloysius
	Hogeschool Sint-Lukas Brussel
	Hogeschool voor Wetenschap en Kunst
	Katholieke Hogeschool Brussel
	Katholieke Vlaamse Sociale Hogeschool Brussel en Parnas
	Katholieke Hogeschool Leuven
	Katholieke Hogeschool Limburg
	Hogeschool voor Economisch en Grafisch Onderwijs
	Katholieke Hogeschool voor Gezondheidszorg Oost-Vlaanderen
	Katholieke Hogeschool voor Lerarenopleiding en Bedrijfsmanagement Oost-Vlaanderen
	Katholieke Hogeschool Sint-Lieven
	Katholieke Hogeschool Brugge-Oostende
	Katholieke Hogeschool Zuid-West-Vlaanderen
	Sociale Hogeschool Gent
	Groep T - Hogeschool Leuven
Flemish Community	Hogere Zeevaartschool

7.2. The Number of Students in Higher Education in Flanders

Table 3. Number of students in colleges

School Year	Women	Men	Total
1960 - 1961	9,873	10,751	20,624
1965 - 1966	16,663	15,062	31,725
1970 - 1971	18,897	17,259	37,156
1975 - 1976	21,540	21,679	43,219
1980 - 1981	29,790	28,982	58,772
1985 - 1986	36,210	33,137	70,094
1990 - 1991	42,417	39,732	82,149
1991 - 1992	41,848	39,001	80,849
1992 - 1993	44,286	40,572	84,858
1993 - 1994	47,896	43,056	90,952
1994 - 1995	48,145	42,386	90,531
1995 - 1996	48,687	42,544	91,231
1996 - 1997	50,336	43,804	94,140
1997 - 1998	52,001	45,779	97,780

Source: Ministry of the Flemish Community, Department of Education.

Table 4. Number of students in universities

Academic Year	Women	Men	Total
1960 - 1961	1,861	10,335	12,195
1965 - 1966	4,378	16,474	20,582
1970 - 1971	9,233	25,474	34,697
1975 - 1976	13,348	29,497	42,845
1980 - 1981	18,845	32,415	51,260
1985 - 1986	22,242	31,917	54,159
1990 - 1991	31,125	25,779	56,904
1991 - 1992	32,405	27,133	59,538
1992 - 1993	32,980	28,251	61,231
1993 - 1994	33,431	29,409	62,840
1994 - 1995	33,945	30,585	64,530
1995 - 1996	34,624	32,062	66,686
1996 - 1997	35,050	33,143	68,193
1997 - 1998	34,094	35,059	69,153

Source: Ministry of the Flemish Community, Department of Education.

7.3. Participation Index

With education being compulsory until the age of 18, the level of participation (defined as the number of young people in education as a percentage of the reference age group in the total population) approximates 96% in the period of full-time compulsory education (age 6 to 16). After this period, the level of participation is above the OECD-mean (see table 5).

Table 5. The level of participation in the Flemish education system (in %) (1994-1995)

	age 5 - 29	age 18	age 19	age 20
Flanders	63.6	81.8	67.5	60.9
OECD countries - mean	61.3	63.6	47.2	39.4

Source: Ministry of the Flemish Community, Department of Education, 1998: 26, 38.

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